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ABSTRACT

A school's promotion policy is an integral component of its overall educational policy. In conjunction with achievement goals, it defines the levels of performance that permit students to move through grade levels and to graduate. This digest reviews the various promotion policies and practices in current use by secondary schools, particularly those in urban areas. The following strategies are commonly used by high schools to move students toward graduation: (1) social promotion; (2) tracking; and (3) merit promotion. More than 40 states--and most urban school districts--have implemented minimum competency criteria for high school education. But competency-based promotion, which relies upon a committed and aggressive administration, may have created a new class of dropouts in school districts where it has been adopted. Grade retention and compulsory summer school appear to be the most common alternatives to promotion. However, grade retention is expensive and may be racially and socioeconomically biased. Many urban school districts require the completion of a minimum number of credits, including certain prescribed courses and sometimes electives, as a condition for the award of a high school diploma. Districts vary in their policies regarding special needs students who are not able to meet the minimum requirements for graduation, including students in special or vocational education. Six issues to be considered while assessing and developing promotional policies are identified. A six-item list of references is included. (BJV)

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PROMOTION POLICIES IN THE URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

ERIC/CUE DIGEST NO. 48

by Michael Webb and Paul Bunten

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PROMOTION POLICIES IN THE URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

A school's promotion policy is an integral component of its overall educational policy. In conjunction with achievement goals, it defines the levels of performance that permit students to move through grade levels and to graduate.

In the nineteenth century, the organization of high schools by grade level became an established practice. Students were not allowed to progress from one grade level to the next—or to receive a high school diploma—until they met specific performance standards. During the Depression, however, a system of "social promotions" began to be instituted. In an effort to maintain students' interest in school and to prevent them from dropping out, schools began to consider age and maturity as well as achievement in deciding whether to promote students.

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of public interest in student promotions, primarily in response to evidence that substantial numbers of students progress through school without acquiring basic skills or fundamental academic competencies. Social promotions, differentiated tracking, and other practices that allow students to "squeak through" high school with low performance have been criticized as serving neither society nor students well. Rigid, uniform promotion policies, on the other hand, have been implicated as encouraging students to drop out. In the context of this debate, this digest presents a resume of the various promotion policies and practices in current use by secondary schools, particularly those in urban areas.

Types of Promotion Policies

Three strategies are commonly used by high schools to move students toward graduation (Labaree, 1984):

1. *Social promotion* automatically advances all members of an age-cohort from one grade to the next, regardless of individual achievement. Students in each grade will thus be of a common age, but of widely differing academic abilities.

2. *Tracking* sorts students into broad categories according to perceived ability. Students can thus be promoted according to standards that are different for each track (academic, vocational, special education, and so forth).

3. *Merit promotion* results from measuring individual achievement against fixed academic standards. Students are thus retained or advanced solely on the basis of demonstrated academic ability.

A review of the published promotion policies of 21 of the nation's largest school districts, conducted by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education in 1984, suggested that in some cases the practice of promoting high school students might mean little in terms of competency or achievement. Rather, it depended primarily upon the students' progress toward accumulating the number of courses required for graduation.

For example, students attending public schools in New York City were considered juniors if they could be expected to meet all of the requirements for a diploma within two years of regular schooling. Oklahoma City Public Schools equated each grade level with a minimum number of credits. Students became juniors when they had earned 20 to 27 credits. To be promoted in Norfolk, Philadelphia, San Jose, and Milwaukee, students must have accumulated not only a specified number of credits, but credits of a particular type. Thus students could not become juniors until they had completed the entire sophomore curriculum, irrespective of any additional credits they might have earned from electives.

Competency-Based Promotion

More than 40 states—and most urban school districts—have implemented minimum competency criteria for high school education. Student competency is generally assessed through the use of standardized tests, both to diagnose learning problems and to decide whether students will be promoted to the next grade or graduate from school.

But however attractive competency-based promotion may seem at first as an alternative to automatic mechanisms of grade advancement, it may have created a new class of dropouts in school districts where it has been adopted (Archer & Dresden, 1987). Students who are suddenly faced with an increase in academic expectations, without a corresponding increase in the remedial help they need to meet the higher standards, may experience a heightened sense of frustration and failure. These students may believe that their only alternative is to leave the educational system without a diploma. Furthermore, failure to pass minimum competency tests may be disproportionately high among minority groups with limited English proficiency.

A school district that implements a competency-based promotion system must rely upon a committed and aggressive administration to discourage excessive leniency from debasing the policy. The District of Columbia Public Schools (1986) have recommended that administrators responsible for the success of such a promotion policy must also be given the authority to mandate remediation where academic deficiencies persist, and to intervene in situations where irregular school attendance threatens to compromise the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

Alternatives to Promotion

Grade retention and compulsory summer school appear to be the most common alternatives to promotion. Proponents of grade retention commonly claim that it serves two main purposes: it remedies inadequate academic progress and it helps students who are judged to be emotionally immature. However, substantial research done on grade retention has demonstrated that thus far there is inconclusive evidence to support either claim (Jackson, 1975; Thompson, 1980; Ascher, 1988). It is also an expensive practice: Jackson estimates that the cost to school districts for student retention in a single year (1971-2) was between $739 and $903

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million. Observers have also expressed concern over the disproportionate number of minority and lower class students retained.

Some school districts (such as Boston and Portland) have instituted a policy of early assessment in order to anticipate potential learning problems that might lead to non-promotion, and to allow early intervention with appropriate remedial learning activities.

Graduation

All 21 of the urban school districts surveyed by Labaree (1984) required the completion of a minimum number of credits, including certain prescribed courses and sometimes electives, as a condition for the award of a high school diploma. In addition, minimum competency testing was a requirement in many districts (including Boston, Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia), usually in response to legislation at the state level. Some districts (such as Minneapolis) awarded two types of diplomas to students, depending upon whether they had passed optional competency tests.

Districts varied in their policies regarding special needs students who are not able to meet the minimum requirement for graduation, including students in special or vocational education. Options included the award of a Certificate of Attendance (in Boston and Denver); a Special Diploma for educable mentally handicapped, hearing impaired, or learning disabled students (in Duval County and Jacksonville); or a Certificate of Achievement to indicate that some, but not all, of the requirements for graduation had been met (in Jefferson County, Louisville, and Atlanta).

Recommendations for Review and Development

Several issues to be considered while assessing and developing promotional policies have been identified by Labaree (1984):

- *Consequences of Promotional Policies.* Is a policy of raising promotional standards likely to bring about the intended increase in student achievement? Are the indirect effects of this policy—on teaching, curriculum, school organization, finances, politics, and labor relations—desirable, or even acceptable?
- *Rigidity of the Promotional Standard.* Is the standard framed in terms of standardized test scores (inflexible), grades assigned by the teacher (more flexible) or multiple criteria (most flexible)?
- *Validity of the Retention Criteria.* How close is the relationship between the skills tested and the skills taught in the classroom?
- *Balance between Retention and Remediation.* Is greater emphasis placed upon holding back low achievers or upon providing them with remedial instruction?
- *Handling of Multiple Hold-Overs.* Are there policies that specify the number of times a student can be retained and that explain how to handle a student who reaches this permissable limit?
- *Impact of New Policies on Student Achievement.* Do achievement levels rise after the policy is implemented, and if so, can the increase be attributed to the policy itself, or to external factors?

—Michael Webb and Paul Bunten

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